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Oman-United States: Reviewing the Access Agreement

Summary

The upcoming review of the Oman-US access agreement will provide Muscat the opportunity to redress what it views as troublesome aspects of its relationship with the United States. The Omanis have proposed several changes to the agreement, stemming in part from a technical review by British officers. The changes reflect Muscat's effort to assert its sovereignty over US activities in Oman, as well as an effort to gain greater compensation for US use of Omani facilities. Although we judge that Oman's desire to maintain the security relationship with Washington will ultimately lead it to accept the status quo, Omani leaders are not likely to retreat quickly from their positions and will probably resist any new US initiatives.

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This paper was prepared by [REDACTED] the Persian Gulf Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Persian Gulf Division, NESA, [REDACTED]

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The Omani Changes

Sultan Qaboos' government has proposed several changes to the accord. Three that are likely to prove the most troublesome are:

- Muscat's insistence that it retain ultimate control of facilities constructed by the US. Muscat wants the agreement to specify that the facilities are Omani property and that the US must seek the approval of Omani military authorities before using them.
- Muscat's request for the right to drawdown prepositioned US military stocks in an emergency that does not involve US forces, after consultation with Washington.
- Muscat's wish to deny caretaker maintenance contractors special privileges concerning entry into Oman, the importation of goods, and other administrative matters.

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What is Behind the Revisions?

The US Embassy attributes many of Oman's proposed changes to the active role of several expatriate British advisers in the review of the accord; British officers did not participate in the negotiations leading to the conclusion of the Access Agreement in 1980. The US Ambassador suggests that the Omanis have now included the British in order to increase their commitment to the agreement.

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We agree that Oman's proposed changes are intended in part to limit criticism of the agreement by British officers. Nonetheless, we believe the British officers acted under the general direction of the Omani Foreign Ministry and produced revisions that they and the Omanis perceive to be in Oman's interest. We doubt that they muddied the waters to protect London's interests.

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[redacted] the Omanis believe that many of the difficulties in implementing the original agreement during the last five years were caused by language in the original document, which permitted different interpretations. The Omanis were willing to go along with the proposed US language in 1980, but [redacted] they now intend to make changes in hope of reducing problems of interpretation. [redacted]

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Changing Perceptions

We judge that senior Omani officials--particularly Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Yusuf al-Alawi--recognize the proposed changes as significant Omani assertions of sovereignty and not merely as technical revisions. The changes result from the officials' desire for a more equal relationship with the US and from their changed strategic perceptions.

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Omani leaders recognize that conditions in Oman and the Gulf have changed since the access agreement was negotiated in early 1980. Muscat's primary concern then was security. The Shah had just fallen; the Soviets had invaded Afghanistan; South Yemen was still supporting insurgent efforts to foment a rebellion in Dhofar; and Libya, Ethiopia, and South Yemen were forming the Tripartite Pact. The Omanis saw themselves being surrounded by pro-Soviet regimes. Despite close ties to the British, Sultan Qaboos concluded that London could not be relied upon to protect Oman in the 1980s, and was attracted to the US at the same time that Washington was looking for regional allies.

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Since then, however, Oman's concerns about regional threats have lessened. Iran and Iraq have sapped each other's strength since their war began in September 1980. In South Yemen the pragmatic Ali Nasir Muhammad al-Hasani seized power in April 1980 and has moderated Aden's policies toward Oman. The Tripartite Pact is moribund. The USSR is bogged down in Afghanistan and no longer appears so menacing to Muscat.

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Generational change is also affecting Oman's relations with the US. In 1980 Oman was governed by the "Muscat Mafia"--a small clique of Omanis and British expatriates

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They had little interest in the concerns of the Arab world. Since 1982, a younger and less parochial generation of Omanis has begun to assume leadership positions. Described as nationalists by Embassy officials, these Omanis, in particular Alawi, are promoting policies that are more Oman-centered and more sensitive to Arab issues. Under Alawi's direction, Muscat has expanded ties with its Gulf neighbors and drawn closer to like-minded Arab moderates. Oman has played a prominent role in the deliberations of the Gulf Cooperation Council, and the Council in turn has influenced Omani foreign policy. GCC deliberations also have brought Oman into sustained contact with the other monarchical regimes on the Arabian peninsula and exposed Omani policymakers to inter-Arab and Arab-Israeli issues.

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In our view, Alawi's primary goal is to assert Omani sovereignty--and avoid the charge that Oman has allowed Washington to establish bases--while retaining the security relationship with Washington. An incident that still rankles Omanis was the US use--without Omani knowledge or permission--of its territory for the Iranian hostage rescue mission. Omani leaders were affronted that Washington did not trust them enough to inform them of its

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plans. Moreover, the Omanis believe that US financial compensation--roughly \$300 million between 1981 and 1984--for the facilities and the political risks Muscat takes is niggardly compared with the billions of dollars the US provides to Egypt and Israel. This perception is almost certainly reflected in Oman's desire to receive attractive financing for an F-16 purchase. In addition, Omani officials complain that US military projects have grown too quickly and are too complex.

We judge that the Omanis are concerned that the US presence will drag Muscat into a conflict not its own. As the prospect of US military action against Iran has loomed larger in Omani eyes, so too has Omani caution about becoming involved. In March 1985, for example, Sultan Qaboos used a press interview to signal Iran and other Gulf states that Oman would not necessarily support US military action in the region and that Muscat had its own interests separate from Washington's.

Implications

The upcoming talks will be cordial but contentious. The Omanis are likely to insist on their proposed changes to the agreement. They are also likely to seek to convince the US to fund additional military construction. They have already indicated their unhappiness with cuts in previously planned projects.

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Oman's desire to purchase F-16 fighters may make easier the resolution of some troublesome issues. Progress in providing advanced weapons systems would, in our view, assuage many of Oman's concerns about the durability of Washington's ties to Muscat. We believe that attractive financing for the F-16 package would be seen as another form of compensation for facilities in Oman.

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Although the Omanis will press hard for their proposed language changes and for additional compensation, we do not believe that they would abrogate the access accord if they do not get their way. Muscat believes that Washington is the only credible guarantor of its security and that unhappiness with some aspects of the relationship does not eliminate Oman's need for a strong friend.

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The Omanis probably will agree to the status quo only reluctantly and after hard bargaining. Without US concessions on the sovereignty issue, the problems and misunderstandings stemming from the 1980 accord will persist and Oman will interpret the accord in ways that protect Muscat's sovereignty over facilities used by the US. Moreover, the Omanis would be unlikely to agree to expand existing joint projects or agree to new US initiatives in the next few years.

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